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Experiences with hummingbirds.

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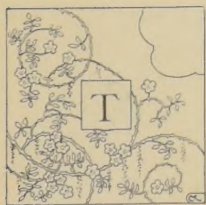


Her gossamer wings can be faintly seen.

## EXPERIENCES WITH HUMMING- BIRDS

BY HERBERT K. JOB

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR



THOUGH the art-museums of Europe may have some treasures of which America cannot boast, our continent has the distinction of a monopoly of the world's supply of hummingbirds, the gems of all the feathered creation. Of these there are said to be some four hundred species—the four hundred we may well call them!—nearly all of which are peculiar to the tropical regions. Only eighteen cross the borders of the United States from Mexico, and occur only in our southwestern States,

except one, our familiar little “ruby-throat,” which is found throughout the United States and up as far north as Labrador. Nothing in bird-life is comparable with these wonderful tiny creatures. They are literally gems, in that their feathers flash brilliant, wonderful hues which vary as in the kaleidoscope at every angle of vision. Their motions are too rapid for the eye clearly to follow. Though they have no song, and emit only an insect-like chirp or squeak, the hummer, as a writer has prettily said, “needs none. Its beauty gives it distinction, and its wings make music.”



Nearly everyone knows the little hummer—the ruby-throated hummingbird, the books call it—which darts about in the garden from flower to flower. Its tiny wings move so rapidly that they appear only as a blur, and produce the humming sound from which the bird takes its name.

The popular idea is that the hummer lives only on honey, gathered from flowers. This is a mistake. The bird does secure some honey, but its food consists mainly of the small insects which frequent the flowers. Some of these insects are injurious to the blossom, and the tiny bird fulfils a useful function in destroying them. That the hummer is insectivorous is also shown by its habit of catching tiny insects on the wing, which is occasionally observed.

So unafraid are hummingbirds of man that they will readily enter open windows of houses, if they see flowers within. I have even read of their visiting the artificial flowers on a lady's hat when she was walking out, and other writers speak of their taking sugar from between a person's lips. In a room they become confused, and, being so frail, are apt to injure themselves by striking against objects. More than once I or members of my family have caught the frightened little waifs for their good, and released them in the open air. It is of no use to try to keep them in captivity, unless, possibly, it were in a greenhouse where there were plenty of flowers, for no artificial food has ever been found which will nourish them. Yet even there they would probably kill themselves by flying against the glass.

We may expect the little hummer in the Middle States or New England early in May each year. They seem to come paired, and resort each time to the familiar hunting-ground. At least we are apt to see hummingbirds in the same places year after year. By early June each pair has its dainty nest and two tiny white eggs hardly larger than peas. A favorite site for the nest is an old lichen-grown apple tree in an orchard, generally not high up. But often they will choose some shade tree, like a maple, in the garden or along the street. Sometimes it is on a tree in a swamp or in deep woods.

It was in the latter situation that I found my first occupied nest of the hummer, though, when a small boy, I remem-

ber discovering the home of a pair that frequented our garden, saddled to the lower limb of a larch tree close by the house, but only after the birds had left it. It was one Memorial Day, and with a friend I was looking for birds in some tall white pine woods. My attention was attracted by a veery, or Wilson's thrush, which flew up from the ground into a pine. Just as it alighted it was attacked in the most violent manner by a tiny bird, which was so quick in its motions that I could hardly tell what was going on. The thrush, though a far larger bird, unable to rival such velocity and deftness of attack, was driven off in a hurry. Naturally we assumed that there was a nest near, and sure enough, there it was, about two-thirds way out on one of the lower branches of the pine, some fifteen feet up, not in a crotch, but built on to the branch itself, as though it were a knot or excrescence of the same. While we examined it, the female buzzed and darted about our heads like an angry bee. As for the male, he did not put in his appearance, and I have reason to fear that he is a shirk. Since then I have found various nests, but I do not in any case recall seeing the male about when his wife was in distress over the intrusion. Some writers state that he leaves to her all the care of eggs and young. Formerly he was very ardent in his protestations of affection and devotion, but now, as the flowers expand in greater profusion, he finds them more interesting than the prosaic duties of home.

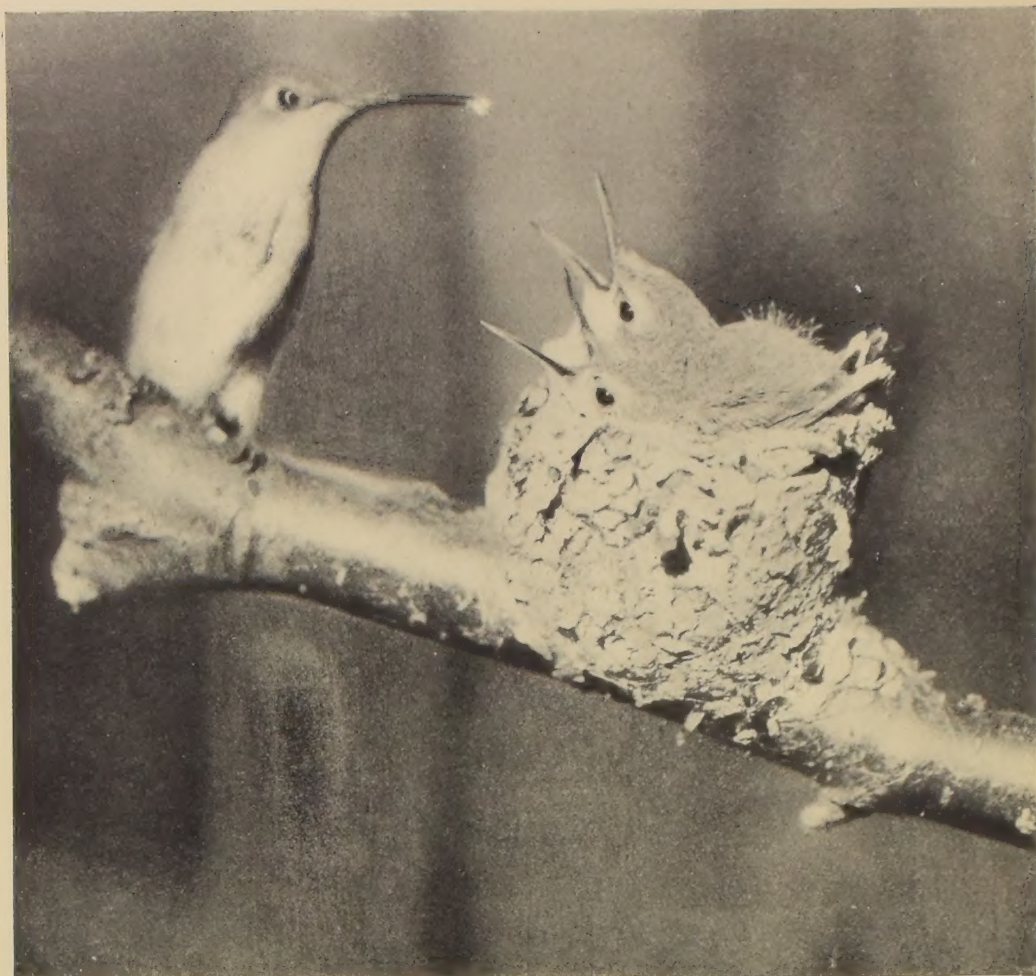
This home, howbeit, is one of the most remarkable and artistic creations of all bird-architecture. It is a tiny, delicate cup, made of the softest plant-down, saddled upon some rather slender branch, so deftly that it seems a part thereof. The saliva of the birds is used to compact and secure the material, and likewise to coat the exterior with the gray-green lichens so generally found upon trees. This makes it so assimilate with the surroundings that it is a very difficult object to discover. And thereby hangs a tale. A gentleman had told me that, if I would call upon him, he would show me an occupied nest of a hummingbird in his orchard. When I came, he was out of town, but I thought I would see if I could not find the nest myself. So I made inspection from tree to tree, and presently the female hummer





Almost old enough to leave the nest.





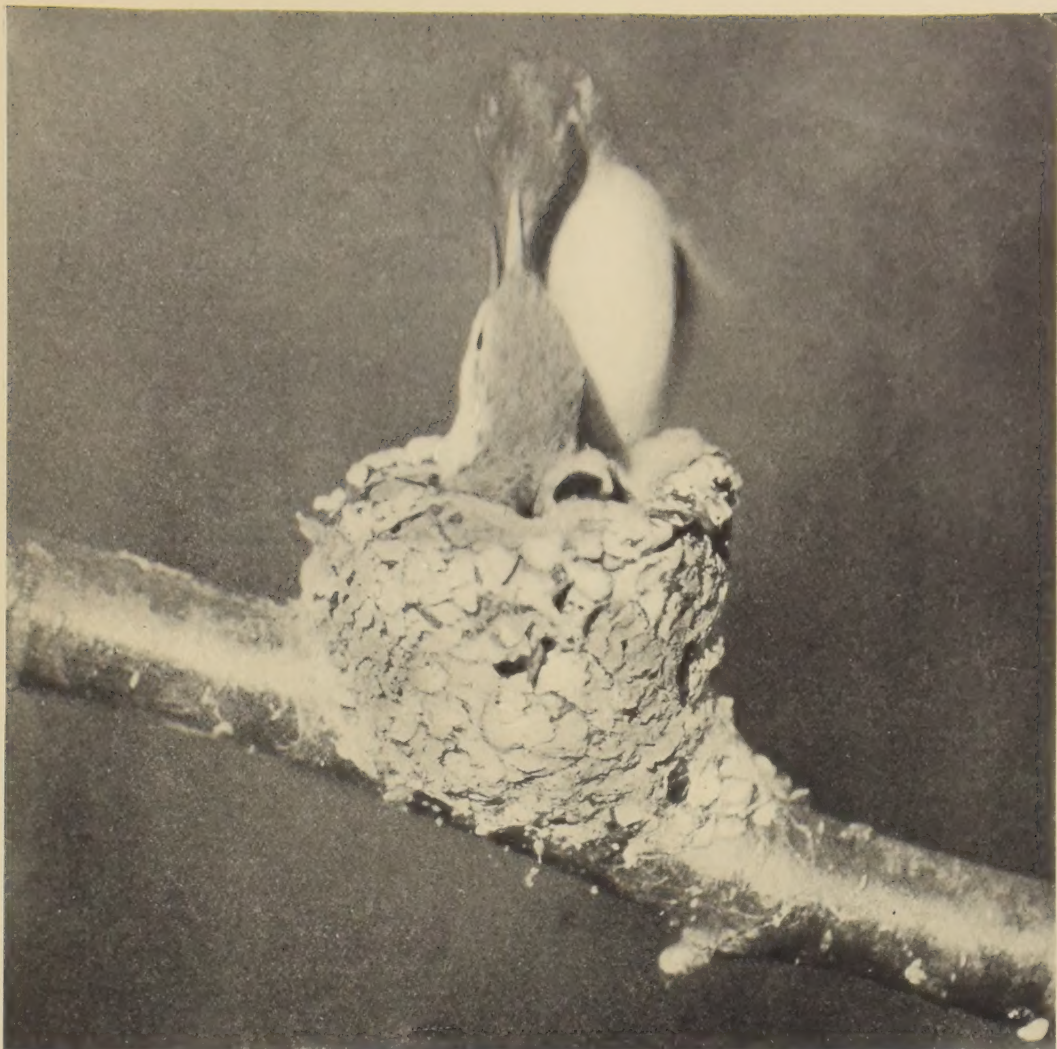
Begging for food.

began to fly about me anxiously. We played a game of hot and cold, until it became evident that the nest must be in a certain low apple tree which had many dead, lichen-covered branches. Some of these came down nearly to the ground, and for quite a while I stood by the tree, running my eyes along each branch in order, trying to make out the nest, while the female kept darting frantically at my head. It must have been nearly a quarter of an hour before I discovered that I was standing almost touching the nest with my hands, having been looking right over it all the time. It contained two fresh eggs, this being in the early part of June. The branch upon which it was built was completely overgrown with lichens, and the nest, being covered with them, too, was wonderfully disguised, though there were no leaves to hide it.

One day in July a little girl came running in to tell us that she had found a hummer's nest in the orchard. It was placed on a low branch, about breast high from the ground, and contained but one egg. The little mother darted about, alighting here and there on slender twigs as I examined the nest. When I withdrew a few yards, the little mother would quickly return to her duty. It was a beautiful sight to see her enter the nest. She did not perch upon the edge, but hovered over it, and, with wings speeding like the wheel of a dynamo, she would then drop right into her little cup just as a piece of thistle-down might have settled upon it, lightly and airily, making one of the prettiest bird-sights that I have ever seen.

Evidently it was a fine chance to photo-





The operation of feeding.

graph, not only the nest, but the bird upon it as well. This was a decade ago, when I was just beginning to photograph wild birds, and I did not utilize the opportunity as fully as I should have done later. However, I set up the camera upon the tripod, very close to the nest, and, attaching the thread to the shutter, sat down under the next tree to await my opportunity. The hummingbird returned to the nest at once, paying no heed to the instrument. Unfortunately the foliage obscured the light, and at that time I was under the false impression that a slow plate would give the best results, with most detail, in this sort of work. This necessitated a timed exposure, and the bird was almost sure to turn her head when the shutter opened. Thus I

accumulated a series of pictures of a double-headed hummingbird, a species which is not recognized by scientists. One negative, from a snapshot, was sharp but very faint. Yet there is hope even thus of a valuable exposure, if only there be detail, however weak. The best thing to do is to print or enlarge on the most contrasty grade of glossy lamp-light paper, which will give a strong, plucky print. If it is too black, reduce it to the proper degree with red prussiate of potassium reducer, as one would a plate, giving local reduction where it is needed. Then photograph the print in a way not to show the grain of the paper, and the resulting negative, as compared with the original, will prove a surprise and a delight. A rare and valuable picture is



well worth this trouble, and I have saved many undertimed snapshots in this way.

The time came, at length, when I was to have every facility for this study, and when, with wider experience, I could take full advantage of it. It came at a season when I had no idea of any more pictures of bird-nesting, unless of the ever tardy goldfinch—in mid-August. A road was being cut through a tract of woods, just back from the shore of a small lake. One afternoon they cut down a black birch tree, and the next morning, when one of the men was cutting it up, he heard a continued chirping, and, upon making investigation, found the nest of a hummingbird out on a slender branch of the fallen tree, about twenty-five feet up from the base. It was tipped over to one side, yet in it was a young hummer, clinging to the soft lining, and on the ground beneath it was another. They were nearly fledged, and just about able to fly. Taking pity on the poor little things, the man cut off the limb with the nest, fixed it firmly between two trees about five feet from the ground, and placed the little hummers upon it. At first they fluttered out, and, indeed, they seemed so much too large for the tiny cup that it appeared almost impossible for them both to fit in. But what man could not do, the birds did themselves, when they got good and ready. The men on the estate were much interested in the tiny creatures, and, fearing that they were abandoned to starve, sent to me to learn how to feed them. Fortunately, however, there was no need for clumsy human effort, which would have been unavailing. The mother bird soon found them, as she may have done already, and was busy feeding them long before I arrived, which was not until the next day.

This is a most remarkable performance. The parent alights on the edge of the nest, and stands quietly for a moment, while the young are begging with all the eloquence and earnestness which would betoken a matter of life and death—as it certainly is to them, poor little things! Perhaps she is deciding which youngster to favor, and making inward preparation for what naturalists call the act of regurgitation. Selecting the fortunate hopeful, she inserts her bill into the widely-opened mouth and forces it deep down into the

anatomy of the youngster. Then she rams it violently up and down, and with each jerk ejects from her crop the luscious nectar, a mixture of partly digested insects and honey. Sometimes she would bring a small whitish insect held at the tip of her bill, but when she fed this to the chick, she also continued the meal with other food from the store below. Meanwhile the other little fellow would appear terribly disappointed. Then the shutter would click, and she would dart away, but we may believe that the next time she knew enough to feed the other chick.

I had only one more shot that afternoon, and then the sun sank behind the tops of the forest. In the little clearing the light only served from eleven to four o'clock, and the next day I gave this space of time to the work. At first I moved the nest lower down, and secured even better pictures of the young than I had done the day before. Just as I had made the last exposure which I desired, the old bird began to buzz around. One of the young became very uneasy. It stirred about in the nest and began to whirl its wings. At first this had no effect, but presently the wings took hold upon the air, and the little one floated upward as slowly and gently as a feather, and reached a branch a dozen feet from the ground. I tried to catch it and put it back, but only made it fly up higher into the forest, and I saw it no more, though at times I could hear its little insect-like chirp.

The nest was now in shadow, so I moved it a few yards out into open sunlight, and set the camera. Presently the mother bird returned, but did not see the nest and went off. Time dragged by, and she did not return. Alarmed and remorseful, I put the nest back close to its former location. The sun's rays came to it, but not the mother. Meanwhile, the poor little chick chirped hungrily, and made my heart ache for it. Finally, well along in the afternoon, I heard the familiar buzz, and when the mother came and fed the chick, gratitude and delight welled up in my soul. The old hummer now returned at frequent intervals, and I secured four more pictures.

The following afternoon I drove my wife up to see the wonder, if, indeed, it were not too late. To our joy the tiny bird was still in the nest, and its mother most attentive.



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Syracuse, N. Y.

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